

On-line support of students mobility

TOMASZ WALASEK¹⁾, JACEK PIĄTKOWSKI¹⁾, OLGA STAWSKA¹⁾, DOROTA MORAWSKA-WALASEK²⁾

¹⁾ Czestochowa University of Technology
Al. Armii Krajowej 21
42-200 Czestochowa
POLAND

²⁾ College of Foreign Languages
ul. Kopernika 17/19/21
42-200 Czestochowa
POLAND

Abstract: - In the paper the Content Management System (CMS) supporting the process of preparing, sending and receiving and evaluating students going for their exchange/placement abroad has been presented. The CMS system is the result of Needs Analysis performed under ESMOS - Enhancing Student Mobility through Online Support - a project partnership of 6 Universities from the UK, Italy, Austria, Lithuania, Poland and Bulgaria. The project is funded by the SOCRATES Programme/Minerva Action, which seeks to promote European co-operation in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in education. The combined aims of the ESMOS partnership are to develop, evaluate and model the usage of Virtual Learning Environments and online technologies to support students in mobility situations throughout the EU.

Key-Words: -i-ERASMUS, CMS, students mobility, ESMOS, VLE.

1 Introduction

ESMOS is a project financially supported by the SOCRATES/Minerva European Commission initiative, which aims to enhance student mobility through online support. The project is coordinated by the University of Salford (UK). The project partners are the University of Calabria (Italy), Czestochowa University of Technology (Poland), Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania), D. Tsenov Academy of Economics (Bulgaria) and FH JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences (Austria). It is a 2 year project which will run until December 2006.

Within the ESMOS partnership there are different levels of internationalization at each university. Some partners have more experience of international mobility activities; others are beginning to build up knowledge in student exchange and placements. There are also differences in the number of students at the universities and in the number of outgoing students.

In the first stage of the ESMOS project all partners researched the current level of support for placement and exchange students at each university and wrote institutional reports on their findings. The reports were summarized into a final network report, which then was used as a basis for further discussion with all stakeholders in order to analyze the needs of all actors involved in placements and exchanges. The objectives of the Needs Analysis were to explore the needs of both

target groups involved in student mobility: students involved in international work placement or studies abroad as well as staff at home universities who support the students (including staff at offices for international relations or exchange officers, departmental coordinators, institute tutors etc). [1]

The ESMOS partnership has explored existing practice in mobility student support, particularly investigating how technology is being utilized to support students. It has also examined the factors that affect exchange students and has identified problems with meeting student mobility numbers. During the first year of the project all partners have collaborated on an in-depth needs analysis of those involved in international study exchange and work placement programs. The results obtained were used for the development of a methodology for European mobility student support using a web-based approach. This methodology acknowledges different styles of teaching and learning and the difficulties experienced by international students and the academics teaching them in a cross-cultural context. The resulting VLE IT Support Model and Protocols are now being implemented and evaluated in a series of case studies involving the application of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and online technologies in student exchange and placement programs throughout the EU.

It was visible in the preliminary stage of the project that the support given by the home university could refer to

many aspects – from organizational matters through the didactical help up to psychological support. Having examined the IT used by the partners of the project it was discovered that all universities were commonly using the Internet (www, e-mail), phone and fax to communicate between students going for their exchange/placement and their tutors or coordinators at the home university. Although the above solutions have many advantages coming from their popularity and availability, they cannot be ranked as modern or perspective – especially in the aspect of delivering different forms of support for students exchange and placement.

Technologically the most sophisticated solution (among the partners’ institutions) was presented by the University of Calabria – Italy – “Socrates Manager (SM), a system which is already being used by sixteen different Italian universities. Socrates Manager is an on-line service, developed by the University of Calabria to manage the process of students exchange, delivering a number of tools aiding the activities before, during and after the exchange. The system significantly simplifies most of the administrative work for both the students and exchange coordinators. The service is constantly being expanded with newer components (modules) widening the range of support for both the students and university staff.

The Needs Analysis of the ESMOS report states that ”A very strong need of many exchange officers is a full electronic and web page support which includes online registration of applicants. The web page should be backed up by a powerful database” [2]. The i-ERASMUS CMS system presented in the paper is the solution proposed by Czestochowa University of Technology (CzUT) on the basis of Socrates Manager developed by University of Calabria. The project is implemented by students. Presently the system is in Polish but it will soon be translated into English. The system is created with use of Open Source technologies and applications: PHP 5, PostgreSQL, XML, HTML, CSS and JavaScript which makes it very cheap and available. Main functionalities built into the CMS are:

- Managing on line data base of agreements,
- Managing on line students enrolment,
- On-line access to all the necessary documents,
- Registration of students through on-line forms,
- Application forms available on-line, (print and export to pdf, rtf),
- Clear, on-line ranking list of students,
- Selective searching of the partner institutions (Erasmus code, discipline code, language)
- E-mail for contacting students,
- Managing full information about available mobility programs,

- Delivering full and actual information for outgoing and ingoing students,
- Delivering full and actual information for mobility coordinators,
- Managing contracts and documents necessary for exchange,
- Managing students evaluation questionnaires and final reports to be sent to National Agencies.

2 I-ERASMUS Content Management System

2.1 Main menu

The main menu of the system contains 6 main categories: News, Partner Institutions, Important Documents, ABC of the Student, About Socrates (Regulation, Step By Step, Important Links) and Register Me. News can be edited by administrator and coordinators in order to inform students and other persons involved about important dates, changes, new regulations and other relevant issues. Panel Partner Institutions is the listing of all partner universities with the Erasmus Code, Discipline Code, Department and the available exchange positions. There is also information about availability of teacher exchange in the partner institution (Fig.1)

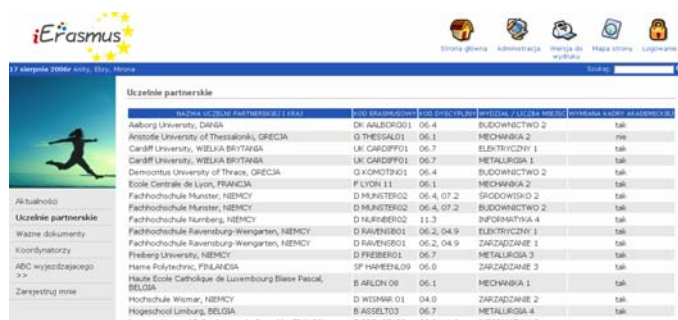


Fig. 1. The look of the menu with sub-menu Partner Institutions open for browser. [3]

Section Important Documents gives access to documents crucial for student applying for exchange or placement. Presently there are seven documents available: Learning Agreement, Personal Data, Questionnaire for students incoming to Czestochowa, Application Form, Confirmation of the Socrates-Erasmus Study Period, Contract Between the Student and the University, Transcript of Records. The documents listed above suit both the incoming and outgoing students of Czestochowa University of Technology (CzUT). Section Coordinators presents the names, contacts and office hours of all the people involved in the exchange/placement process in each department. The

next section – ABC of the Outgoing Student is a set of information needed before and after the exchange such as Socrates-Erasmus Regulations, a Step By Step Guide for students applying for the exchange and Useful Links. Section Register Me allows student to register in the system and be given an account. After registration student must come to the department coordinator to verify their credit book. From now on he/she has an account in the i-Erasmus.

2.2 Menu Administrator

Menu Administrator (fig. 2) allows to fully change or update the necessary information as well as manage different types of users.

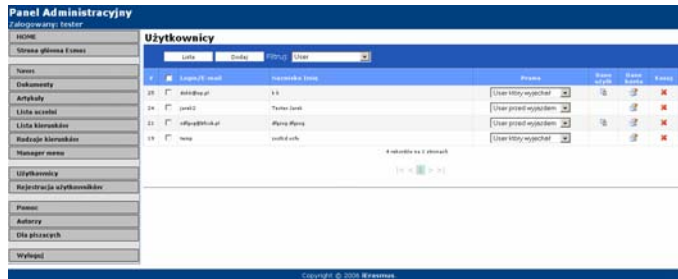


Fig. 2. Menu Administrator. [3]

There are six types of users defined in the system: administrator, advanced user, user, user before the exchange, user during their exchange and user after the exchange. The type of account defines access rights of the user. However the access right can also be changed individually according to the fig. 3. This can be useful if students take part in managing the platform. They can gain additional rights to edit the news, articles or, in the future, to moderate the forum and chat.

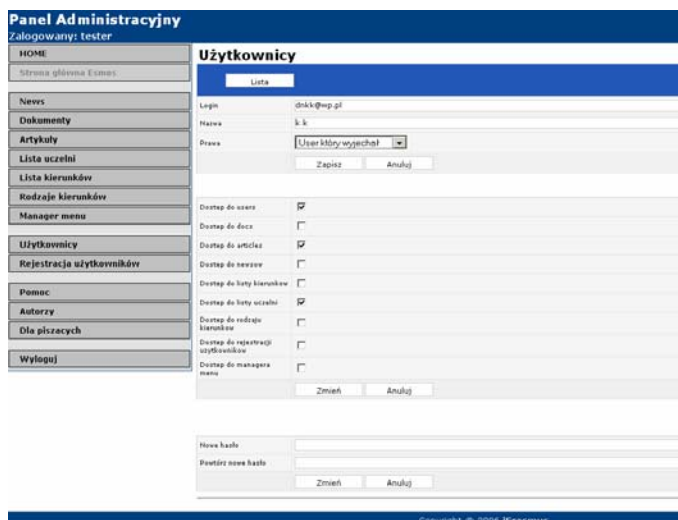


Fig. 3. Defining the access rights for individual users. [3]

Administrator can also change the main menu by adding or removing full sections or their parts to update the

system. Fig. 4. shows the Menu Manager application and its functionalities.



Fig. 4. Menu Manager. [3]

3 Conclusions

The main advantages of implementing a CMS like i-ERASMUS will be:

- One complete source of information about Socrates-Erasmus program,
- Reduced paperwork – time reduction for coordinators,
- Easier program promotion,
- More effective recruitment,
- Easier remote work (e.g. at home),
- Statistics system,
- Faster information exchange,
- All necessary information in one database available online,
- Electronic documents with printing export to .pdf or .rtf options instead of paper documents.

Authors of the paper believe that the system presented hereby will contribute to the increase of students exchange and will make the process of exchange/placement easier for both the students and tutors.

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